DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 035 669 TE 500 476

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TITLE Woodsman, Spare Those "Trees"!
INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Ill.
PUB DATE Mar 64
NOTE 3p.
JOURNAL CIT College English; v25 n6 p431-433 Mar 1964

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.25
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen, Critical Reading, *English Instruction, Literary Analysis, *Literary Criticism, Literature Appreciation, *Poetry, Student Attitudes, Teaching Methods, *Teaching Techniques, Textbooks
IDENTIFIERS Kilmer (Joyce)

ABSTRACT

The wisdom of introducing college freshmen to poetry through destructive literary criticism--a negative assessment of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" is the example here--is questioned. The underlying assumption that a student's taste may be formed by explaining literary standards to him, illustrated by examples of poor poetry, is subjected to scrutiny. Some reasons, gleaned from direct observation, why students tend to like "bad" poems and dislike poetry in general are examined, and the dangers of belittling their literary taste are pointed out. (PL)

From: College English; v25, n6, March 1964

ED035669

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WOODSMAN, SPARE THOSE "TREES"!

Blair G. Kenney

Fascinated by Miss Garlitz' treatment of "Trees" in the Jan. 1962 *CE*, I resolved during my first year of teaching to deal with the poem myself. The results of the experiment seemed to bring up questions more basic than that of literary reforestation or even of teaching the nature poem.

Mine were interesting students; on the whole intelligent and sensitive, but unusually naive, nervous, and competitive. Mostly boys, they were oriented toward science and math, and contemptuous of the required literature course which was not "useful." Luckily they were honest and not subject to coercion by me, so I received a genuine response. In the 1960 edition of *Understanding Poetry* Brooks and Warren have tempered their previous acerbity, but my students still thought that the fault lay in the analysis of the poem, not the poem itself. They were not disturbed to find that the trees (there must be more than one, or why the title?) resemble human beings at different ages, nor was I. But now the trouble began.

Even before I had broached my own objections to "Trees," I was greeted with cynicism and resentment. It was obvious to the class that I was going to attack it in some way of my own. They were used to having teachers attack poems they liked. They knew I would bring up some reason for disliking it which would not convince them, some standard for judgment which they would not comprehend, and I think they wondered why I was going to all that trouble. Like Miss Garlitz' students, they approved of the poem's message. However, they did not couch their appreciation delicately in terms of a "debased romanticism," but gave it to me straight between the eyes. "It is so true." "Poems *are* 'made by fools like me.'" POETRY IS NO GOOD.

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Herein, I suspect, lies the whole story. The average undergraduate remains attached to "Trees" because it gives him a perfect out. Here the freshman who is unfamiliar with and suspicious of poetry, or who has been subjected to too many doses of Wordsworth and Milton at too early an age, and whose view of verse is like his response to the Sunday sermon, finds a kindred spirit, a poet himself who says, as the student interprets it, that poets are fools, and that even the best poem does not possess the artistic merit of a creation of nature. It is not that students love nature more, but that they love poetry less. I judge by the astonishing volume of literature on the subject (see Miss Garlitz' article and the reply by Warren French in *CE* May 1962) that undergraduates all over the country admire "Trees," and while I can hardly believe that all freshman classes are permeated with debased romanticism, I am sure it is a rare class that does not have a hard core of students who are prepared to dislike poetry. There is a touch of the subversive in all of us, and I suspect that my students were only a little more aware of why they like "Trees" than other groups may be.

Perhaps "Trees" has become such an issue because of its subversive quality. Before this experiment I thought that what I disliked in the poem was Kilmer's air of false humility, his coy disclaimer of his own success, but now I believe what disturbs me and other teachers, conscious as we all are of the difficulty of teaching poetry, is that Kilmer seems to betray us by denying the value of what we struggle so hard to convey. Our quarrel is really an emotional one, not about one poem, but about aesthetics, and about who determines what is "lovely" and what is not. Even the tamest student when led to water will not always drink, but even the meekest teacher would like him to, and when he mutters his

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rebellious "I think that I shall never see . . ." we are filled with dismay.

I am dubious about the value of teaching "Trees" not only because I think we have not known why we try to wrest it from our students, but because after this and other such classes I began to question the effectiveness of using a negative approach in introducing the study of poetry. I am concerned because this kind of approach is much in vogue. Brooks and Warren hack away not only at "Trees," but at "The Bells of Shandon," "The Pilgrims," and other poems worthy of study only in that they may illustrate a particular point. Another generally admirable beginning textbook, *Poems: Wadsworth Handbook and Anthology* by C. F. Main and Peter J. Seng, not only blasts away at such verses as "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," but offers for analysis pairs of poems so selected that even the dullest student will realize he is supposed to admire one and reject the other. Laurence Perrine's popular *Sound and Sense* also gives pairs of poems and asks "which is the superior?" (p. 130).

Textbook writers are perhaps still horrified by the discovery I. A. Richards made known in *Practical Criticism* that students tended to prefer bad poems to good, because they were not really reading or understanding either kind. However, thanks to new methods of criticism, undergraduates of today are so much more sophisticated about imagery and the task of puzzling out what poems mean, that I think we need a shift of emphasis in our teaching. These writers assume that one can direct a student's taste by giving him both good and bad poems, and explaining to him that one is good and the other bad. This method seems reasonable to us who are familiar with poetry, but the average freshman of today, though sophisticated about symbolism, is very naive about poetry, because he is as naive as he ever was about his own emotions. In dealing with a poem, if he does it honestly, he is forced to confront the poet's emotions, and in comprehending them he inevitably reveals his own. Poetry is a lost art, particularly for the male student of today. He shies away from it because he shies away from his own feelings, and because it seems to have no place in the brutally competitive and overly "practical" society of today. This student, already prejudiced against poetry, unused to thinking in poetic ways, is not going to be capable of criticising a bad poem well. He does not yet know what a good poem is, or whether he would like one if he saw it, and four chapters by Brooks and Warren are not going to give him enough insight to handle the critique of "Trees" in the fifth.

It is, I discover over and over again, much more difficult to do good destructive literary criticism than good affirmative criticism. It is hard enough for the student to see what is admirable about a poem, but to see the faults of a poem is much harder, because to do this one must first see its virtues and then go beyond this comprehension to an understanding of what a poem is ideally. Students are aware that adverse criticism of an assigned poem is likely to get them a poor grade on a paper, but they are not aware that this is because most adverse criticism is written by students who do not understand the poem to begin with. The fact that Brooks and Warren themselves have such difficulty with "Trees" suggests that the task of showing what is wrong with a poem is far too difficult for a freshman.

More important than this objection (for it can be stimulating to have too difficult a task to do) is the question of the relationship between knowing what is good, and liking what is good. The assumption seems to run through Miss Garlitz' article and these textbook critiques that if the student realizes that "Trees" is a bad poem he will automatically dislike it, and that he *should* dislike it. I think these assumptions are not only fallacious but dangerous. Say Brooks and Warren: "This poem has been very greatly admired by a large number of people. But it is a bad poem" (p. 288). Which are you, they seem to inquire, an ignoramus who likes it, or a sophisticated critic who rejects it? "This is a popular poem. To what does it appeal?" (p. 290). The student who knows enough not to argue with authority will reply "to sentimentality, to slipshod thinking, to stupidity." But deep down a student will resent the idea that he ought to like or to dislike a work of art, he will resent the attempt which is being made to control his feelings about art, and he will resent the confusion

we create when we tell him in one breath to enjoy poetry and in the next to enjoy only certain poems.

I believe that knowing what is good and liking what is good are two very different things, and that in order to avoid blurring this distinction in the students' eyes we must be careful to make it clear to ourselves. I find myself acting as if a student is reprehensible if he professes to like a poem I know to be bad, and yet I often discover that he *also* knows it is bad, but likes it in spite of this knowledge, for reasons which are his business, not mine, and which may have nothing to do with taste. The gap between knowledge and emotion can be a vast one. The devotion of great authors to the works of mediocre ones is a widespread and baffling phenomenon, and even we instructors are not always in command of our literary affections. I know Dryden is a great author, but I am unable to read any of his poems with enjoyment; while Kipling's verse with its "sawdust and belching" happens to have an appeal for me beyond its literary value. Why should my students be otherwise in their feelings?

Warren French *almost* sees the peril of trying to remove a poem such as "Trees" from the students' affections. He says, "when sentimentalists' cherished notions are upset . . . the more common result is not emancipated thinking, but apathy," yet he goes on, "I believe we should make this separation, for while I am Victorian enough to despise apathy, I prefer it to gush" (p. 675). The danger in trying to alter a student's tastes in this fashion is that we are likely to cause so much resentment in him that, if he does not reject our judgment openly, and belligerently, he goes underground. Politely agreeing that now he knows "My Mother's Hands" is a bad poem, and so has reached a new stage in his cultural maturity, he may simply store his liking for it away from the instructor's eyes and display only the proper sentiments; decorous enthusiasm for those poems which, he is told, are "good." Thus he may forever separate genuine feeling from "what you have to say in class." To this student poetry will forever remain frightening rather than pleasant, however well he learns to hand out the party line.

The beginning student's confusion about and hostility toward poetry should not be underestimated. The fact that whenever I have played recordings of poetry, my freshmen have responded with wriggles and titters of embarrassment has proved this to me, if it needed more proof. Male students particularly just do not know how to approach poetry, as many of them do not know how to approach girls, and if one of them likes or thinks he likes *any* poem, "Trees" or "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or "Tobacco is a Filthy Weed" we are that much to the good. Instead of belittling his knowledge and taste before he has had a chance to form it, let us give him that chance by setting before him as many different poems which have some merit as we can.

Let the student have his "Trees"! Let us emphasize the variety of poetry which there is for him to like, rather than these dread standards for liking it. Providing that he understands what the poems say and how they say it, he can hardly help but develop his own standards, and they will be sounder and more genuine standards if they come *after* he has gained a considerable degree of sophistication in poetry, more than a beginning course will give him. If our student has become acquainted with the company of poetry, if he knows good company from bad, let us not worry if occasionally he goes slumming or visits an early love, now outgrown but still dear. In showing him the scope and variety of poetry, let us not miss the woods for the "Trees."

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